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SUBJECT: Kenya After the Crisis: The Ambassador's Visit to Rift Valley

REF: Nairobi 706

SENSITIVE

¶1. (U) Summary. On March 1-2 the Ambassador visited several areas of Rift Valley which were hit hard by the post-election violence. While all these areas were calm in the wake of the signing of the February 28 political accord, they remain traumatized by what happened. People are hopeful that the coalition government will address the underlying land grievances that fueled the violence. The Ambassador used the visit to delineate U.S. policy, to urge support for the political accord, and to emphasize the importance of reconciliation. The message was well-received, and there was widespread praise for what is seen as the decisive U.S. role to end the crisis. The visit was covered extensively by the media. End summary.

¶2. (U) During March 1-2 the Ambassador, accompanied by a Mission team, visited Eldoret, Kitale, and Nakuru in Rift Valley, three of the areas hit hardest by violence during the post-election crisis. Throughout the visit, the Ambassador articulated U.S. policy, and highlighted our support for reconciliation and full implementation of the political accord. Members of civil society, elders, internally displaced persons, government officials, and representatives of the private sector widely and publicly praised the decisive U.S. role in helping resolve the crisis. The visit received extensive media coverage.

Nakuru -- Land Issues and Marginalization

¶3. (SBU) The situation was calm in all these areas, but all are burdened with tens of thousands of internally displaced persons resulting from the post-election violence. The deputy provincial commissioner stated that the violence during January and February were the worst the area had ever experienced, but he put it into perspective by noting that enormous violence and displacements had also occurred following violence during the 1992 and 1997 elections. Then, as now, the underlying cause of the violence is disputes over land. This manifests itself through violent actions of the Rift Valley's dominant Kalenjin ethnic group, who feel economically marginalized, to force out Kikuyus, who own much of the land. The Rift Valley Province is currently hosting 220,000 IDPs. The deputy provincial commissioner

said he had been instructed by the government to focus on reconciliation, particularly by involving local political leaders and Members of Parliament in the process. Contrary to some reports, he maintained that the violence started spontaneously, but was then hijacked by politicians. He also frankly indicated that Kikuyu leaders from Central Province had likely brought in some youths (including perhaps the Kikuyu criminal gang called the 'Mungiki') from there to retaliate for violence perpetrated against Kikuyus. He accurately pointed out that unemployed youth were the fuel for violence and emphasized the need for youth employment programs (which is a focus of the government's March 17 appeal to donors; see septel).

14. (U) The Ambassador participated in an event sponsored by the Ebony Foundation, which handed out micro-enterprise grants to help small businesses rebuild following the violence. The event, covered by the media, highlighted the U.S.-Kenyan partnership, since 40 percent of the Foundation's support comes from private individuals in the U.S. The foundation, which is supporting about 24,000 small businesses across Kenya, allocates 60 percent of its funds for women entrepreneurs. During the event, the Ambassador addressed about 50 small business owners. The fact that all the businesses are controlled by mixed ethnic groups highlights the theme of reconciliation (and also reflects the fact that displacements were largely the result of land disputes, and not primarily the result of ethnic animosities per se).

15. (U) The situation in Nakuru also points out the

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plight of marginalized communities. The Ambassador met with representatives of the Masaai and Ogiek communities. Many years ago both ethnic groups were forced out of this part of the Rift Valley into less productive land. The Maa Civil Society Forum noted that this dates back to the Anglo-Masaai treaty of 100 years ago. They complained that encroachment on their lands is accelerating, with the development of housing schemes that will not benefit the Masaai. The Ogiek community, which is so small that it is not counted among Kenya's 42 ethnic groups, described how it had been forced off land in the Mau Forest along Rift Valley. In another manifestation of unresolved underlying grievances, their court case has been pending 15 years. They are advocating for the creation of a minority people's forum. Both groups emphasized the need for the constitutional review process to be inclusive.

16. (U) The Ambassador met with IDPs from the local stadium. The IDP population is mainly composed of Luos and Luhyas who had been displaced from Central Province and areas around Nakuru, which demonstrates that Kikuyus were not the only groups affected by the violence. As in other camps, the Kenyan Red Cross is doing a good job. U.S. support is deeply appreciated, according to all.

17. (U) The Ambassador's impromptu town hall meeting with about 200 people in the local market resulted in a lively discussion of the current situation. The group was ethnically mixed, reflected Nakuru's cosmopolitan nature, and generally agreed that ethnic groups could continue to live peacefully together. They emphasized, however, the need for land reform to address the grievances that were at the heart of the violence in rural areas.

18. (U) The Catholic Bishop, who had never received an ambassadorial visit, discussed the Church's support for about 19,000 displaced persons. The Bishop echoed others pointing out that the violence was mainly about land issues. He said that unemployed youth were exploited by politicians who organized violence.

¶9. (SBU) Kitale, in the North Rift Valley, has been affected by violence even before the post-election crisis. Kitale borders on the Mt. Elgon area, where a localized land dispute has triggered serious violence during the past two years (a militia group estimated at several thousand operates in the Mt. Elgon area; see reftel). While the town of Kitale itself has been relatively unaffected, the Mt. Elgon violence spills over into surrounding rural areas. Kitale is also part of one of the richest farming areas of Kenya. Local businessmen told the Ambassador over lunch of their grave concerns that post-election violence and the spillover from Mt. Elgon has impeded planting on the eve of the rainy season. They estimated that planting is one-tenth of the normal acreage. Small businessmen in and around the town have suffered from the violence and disruption of the local economy. Kitale, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary, has a young mayor, who talked persuasively about the need for reconciliation and the difficulty of returning people to their homes given what appeared to be a worsening situation in the Mt. Elgon area.

¶10. (U) The Ambassador assisted in distribution of USAID-supplied food to IDPs at the Kitale show grounds, addressed them, and met with their IDP committee. The visit highlighted problems with health care, as supply of HIV/AIDS drugs were disrupted as a result of the violence. (Note: PEPFAR and the Ministry of Health have moved rapidly to restore normal operations in the wake of the political accord. End note.) Most of the IDPs are Luhya, but there were also Turkana, Kikuyu and Kisii. They uniformly expressed deep skepticism that conditions would ever be safe enough for them to return to their homes. This is the third time (1992, 1997 and now) that many of them have been displaced, they noted. Many of the IDPs, therefore, want to be resettled in other areas. They also pointed out that many of the IDPs have no land to go back

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to, since they worked as squatters and day laborers. They stressed how difficult it will be to resume farming activities, since all their implements and supplies were destroyed. Reflecting their belief that they will be in camps for a long time, they also emphasized the need for provisions for adequate education for their children. Finally, they insisted that they receive compensation for their destroyed property. Discussion with the committee revealed great resentment over large tracts of land owned by the GOK's Agricultural Development Corporation and large tracts held by Kikuyu elite (who purchased them during the Kenyatta era).

¶11. (U) A series of meetings with civil society revealed the negative impact on Kitale of the spillover of violence from the Mt. Elgon region. A group of religious leaders talked about the complex land issues in Mt. Elgon which triggered the violence of recent years. (reftel) They urged that the political accord be used as an opportunity to resolve this conflict. A group of women civil society leaders described their impressive efforts to foster reconciliation at the grassroots level. Youth groups focused on the reality that youths were the ones primarily responsible for committing violence, because they could be readily exploited due to pervasive unemployment.

¶12. (U) A large group of elders from the Mt. Elgon area came to Kitale specifically to meet with the Ambassador. They reviewed the troubled history of the Mt. Elgon area, particularly the fact that the Sabaoth people have been increasingly pushed off their ancestral lands since

independence. This has fueled the resentment manifested by their support for the 3,000 strong Sabaot Land Defense Force, an extremely violent local militia which is currently under siege by Kenyan armed forces (refel). The elders said that they are talking with the youth to end violence, but the youth have no incentive to do so. The Ambassador urged the elders to redouble efforts to achieve peace, since violence precludes the kinds of programs needed to address the issues in the Mt. Elgon area.

¶13. (U) At dinner, two senior retired generals discussed the nature of the post-election violence. It was not, they maintained, pre-meditated, but rather a spontaneous reaction to the perception that the election was stolen. Once it started, however, violence was then manipulated for political purposes.

Eldoret -- Hope in the Epicenter of Violence

¶14. (U) An extraordinary one-day visit to Mt. Elgon highlighted both the terrible dimensions of the violence which took place there, and reasons to be hopeful. In the morning the Ambassador visited an IDP camp of 15,000 primarily Kikuyus. He met with the IDP committee, toured the camp, and addressed several thousand IDPs. The IDP committee emphasized the recurrent nature of violence in the area, noting a pattern dating back to the 1960s. IDPs want reassurances that the underlying land issues will be addressed and that safeguards will be put in place to ensure such violence never occurs again. The IDPs also seek compensation. Indicating that most believe they will need to remain in the camp for some time, they urged upgrading of facilities, particularly access to education for their children.

¶15. (U) In the afternoon, the Ambassador spoke to about 5,000 Kalenjins gathered for a peace and reconciliation conference hosted by a U.S.-sponsored NGO. The Ambassador's remarks (see para 19) were broadcast live on the Kalenjin vernacular radio station Kass FM (the Ambassador asked the most popular announcer of the station to be his translator at the rally). The Ambassador told the Kalenjin audience that he had just visited the IDP camp, not more than a kilometer away. He challenged the Kalenjins to extend support to the IDPs, and to reconcile with them. Unexpectedly, all the Rift Valley MPs, including ODM's William Ruto, showed up at the event. Ruto, who has been attacked by Kikuyus as an

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alleged organizer of violence, made a strong speech in which he told the Kalenjin audience that Kikuyus are their friends and neighbors and must be allowed to return to their homes. Text of the Ambassador's remarks are included at the end of the cable.

¶16. (U) The city of Eldoret, which was an epicenter of the violence, was calm. Some burned buildings starkly highlighted the reality of what had happened. The obvious presence of unemployed youth on the streets -- a phenomenon seen throughout the country -- testified to the large challenge inherent in getting this area of the country fully back to normal. A meeting with the Catholic Bishop, however, provided reason to be hopeful. Earlier, the District Commissioner had highlighted the Bishop's efforts as extremely important. The Bishop, who is widely respected in Kenya, has been working systematically at the parish level to promote reconciliation. Peace and reconciliation committees have been set up in 40 parishes; these include elders as well as youth. He has facilitated some meetings between Kikuyu and Kalenjin elders. The Bishop accurately emphasized that the violence was about politics and

economics. It manifested itself along tribal lines (because Kikuyus are perceived as having taken the land and as having stolen the election), but the violence does not reflect ethnic hatred.

¶17. (U) The Bishop believes that his reconciliation efforts have laid the groundwork for small-scale returns in several locations. Per septel, we are working with Catholic Relief Services, one of our implementing partners, to support such returns as soon as they can be safely carried out. At the same time, the Bishop did not minimize how much the violence traumatized the population. He said the Church sponsored an essay program as part of healing and reconciliation efforts. Students were asked to write about the worst day of their lives. One twelve-year-old girl wrote about the day she was forced to watch her sister being gang-raped, and then to witness the decapitation of her brother.

¶18. (U) As horrible as some of the violence was, Kenyans -- even in Eldoret and other parts of Rift Valley -- have reacted very positively to the political accord. They see this as a first step along a difficult path to address underlying land grievances that have repeatedly fueled violence. Progress in that regard will be necessary to give the displaced confidence to return to their homes. In the meantime, reconciliation will undoubtedly yield mixed results, but may be sufficiently acceptable in some areas to permit limited returns. All of this underscores the need for the U.S. to support Kenyan efforts to maintain momentum on implementation of all elements of the political accord, including the reform agenda.

¶19. (U) Ambassador's remarks in Mt. Elgon follow.

Begin text:

I planned this visit to the Rift Valley before the agreement was signed between President Kibaki and the Honorable Raila Odinga -- but I also planned the trip with confidence that a deal would be achieved. I believed this because of the enormous faith I have in the Kenyan people. You and people across this great land made your voices heard that the two leaders must put the interests of the nation first. I commend them both for having done so, but in a very real sense the Kenyan people deserve the most credit for what has been accomplished.

This is my second trip to the Eldoret since the end of December. Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer and I came here and to Kisumu on January 8th to see exactly what had happened in the first days of the violence. Like all Kenyans and their friends, we were shocked by the devastation. The presence of Assistant Secretary Frazer in Eldoret testified to our concerns about how the violence was affecting Kenyans here and throughout the country.

The crisis that Kenya experienced during the past two

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months traumatized people across the ethnic and political spectrum. I know that the people of Rift Valley have been particularly affected by the violence, but many areas throughout Kenya have also suffered. Some of the violence was spontaneous, some of it has been organized by those who seek to exploit young people to advance their selfish political aims, and some amounts to nothing more than hooliganism. There have also been cases of excessive use of force by the police. None of it was justified. Those seeking to arm groups and to plan for further violence must be stopped. And those responsible must be held accountable.

In signing an agreement to work together, Kenya's leaders

have shown the way forward to achieve peace, justice, and reconciliation. Now is the time for all Kenyans to come together to support the agreement so that all Kenyans can enjoy the fruits of economic prosperity, can exercise their democratic rights, and can have access to the educational, health, and other programs that they and their children deserve.

The agreement that was signed was an important first step to help sustain Kenya on its democratic path. The agreement provides an historic opportunity for the Kenyan people to finally address the underlying grievances that have torn the fabric of the nation for far too long. The agenda for institutional reform that the parties are working out -- including constitutional, electoral, and land -- provides a blueprint for accelerating development and strengthening institutions so that the trauma of the past two months will never be repeated. Implementation of the agreement and the reform agenda will be a complex, challenging process, but I am confident that your voices and the political will of your leaders will get results.

Americans understand these issues, because we have experienced similar problems. We fought a civil war. One hundred years later, in 1968 when the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated, violence erupted in a dozen American cities. Many were killed, much property was damaged, and the U.S. military had to be deployed to restore order. This happened because the assassination unleashed pent-up anger regarding longstanding grievances. Civil rights issues that had lingered since the civil war had never been fully resolved. American rose to the challenge of that crisis by grasping the opportunity to deal with these grievances, redoubling efforts on civil rights and related issues. Today, our country is stronger as a result.

As a strong friend and partner of Kenya, we will help the Kenyan people seize their opportunity to address fundamental grievances and to strengthen institutions. We will do this in part by providing 25 million dollars (1.75 billion KS). We will work in consultation with Kenyan civil society groups and with the new coalition government to determine how best to employ these funds. Our focus will be on: supporting implementation of the political agreement and the agreed reform agenda; assisting people to resume their livelihoods; helping with reconstruction and the return of displaced people to their homes; and strengthening democratic governance and institutions.

At the same time, we will continue to provide approximately 1 billion KS in humanitarian assistance for those affected by the violence. We are providing funding to the Kenya Red Cross Society, various U.N. agencies, and numerous non-governmental organizations, including Catholic Relief Services. Our assistance is helping provide food, tents, blankets, clean drinking water, health services, and protection for the displaced.

Rift Valley has been an epicenter of violence during the past two months. Unspeakable things have happened. Yet I challenge the people of Rift Valley to set an example for the nation of peace, dialogue, and reconciliation. I understand this will not be an easy process, but I have faith in the decency and good sense of the Kenyan people. Whether you are a Kalinjen, Luo, Kikuyu, Luhya, Masaai, or a member of one of the other 42 ethnic groups of Kenya, you share certain values of respect for life, of

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hospitality, of love of family -- and, I believe, you share a sense of pride in being Kenyan. Remember that the rich ethnic diversity of Kenya is one of its greatest strengths and offers much to the world. Cherish your values, your unique ways of life, your traditions and

cultures, but reach out to one another in a spirit that truly reflects your values. Show Kenyans the way forward. Be an example to the world. End text.
RANNEBERGER